# Challenges Faced by Fairbury Fair Managers Over 150 Years

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Organizing a small-town fair has never been easy. For 150 years, the Fairbury Fair has required careful planning and hard work by generations of volunteers. Over that long period, fair managers have faced many challenges, including bad weather, financial difficulties, performers who failed to appear, and even several years when the fair could not be held at all.

The first Fairbury Fair was held in 1876. Like many agricultural fairs of that era, its primary purpose was to promote farming and livestock breeding. Farmers from the Fairbury area brought their best animals, crops, and homemade products to compete for prizes and ribbons. The fair also allowed residents to gather with friends and neighbors for several days of entertainment and social activities.

Even in those early years, however, organizing the fair required significant effort. Fair managers had to prepare the grounds, arrange exhibits, schedule races and competitions, and advertise the event. Since most of the organizers were local volunteers, much of this work was done without pay.

One of the biggest challenges facing fair managers has always been the weather. Because the fair is held outdoors, its success has often depended on favorable weather conditions. Rain, storms, and strong winds could easily disrupt events and reduce attendance.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, fairs often featured balloon ascensions and parachute jumps as major attractions. These aerial events were extremely popular with spectators, but they were also highly dependent on weather conditions. Strong winds could make it dangerous or impossible for aeronauts to launch their balloons. Even when a balloon did rise into the air, shifting winds could carry the balloon far from the fairgrounds, forcing the aeronaut to land many miles away.

Fair managers had little control over these conditions. When bad weather prevented a scheduled balloon ascension, the crowd often expressed disappointment, even though the decision to cancel was necessary for safety.

Another challenge faced by fair managers was the reliability of traveling performers. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, fairs often hired entertainers from traveling show companies. These performers moved from town to town across the country and were booked months in advance.

Unfortunately, not every performer honored their contracts. Occasionally, a performer who had been advertised as a major attraction failed to arrive at the fairgrounds. When this happened, fair managers had to scramble to fill the gap in the entertainment schedule.

Newspaper reports from the period show that fair officials sometimes had to make last-minute arrangements to avoid disappointing the crowd.

Despite these occasional problems, the fair continued to attract large audiences. During the early years, many visitors arrived in Fairbury by horse-drawn wagons or by railroad. Special excursion trains sometimes brought hundreds of people from neighboring communities. When the weather was good and the entertainment was appealing, thousands of people could attend the fair. It is hard to believe the Fairbury Fair sometimes attracted seven to ten thousand people on its peak days in the 1880s.

Financial challenges were another constant concern for fair managers. The cost of maintaining the fairgrounds, paying performers, and organizing exhibits required careful budgeting. If attendance was lower than expected, the fair could easily suffer financial losses.

At times, these difficulties were severe enough that the fair could not be held at all. Over the course of its long history, the Fairbury Fair experienced seven years when no fair was held. Several of these interruptions occurred during major national crises, when resources and public attention were focused on more urgent matters.

During World War I and World War II, many young men from the Fairbury area were serving in the military. Wartime restrictions and economic pressures made it difficult to organize large public gatherings. As a result, the fair was suspended during some of these years.

Economic conditions also played a role. During the Great Depression of the 1930s, many communities struggled financially. Fair organizers had to work especially hard to keep the fair operating during those difficult times.

In addition to weather and financial challenges, fair managers also faced the logistical difficulties of organizing large public events. Livestock exhibits had to be arranged, racing schedules coordinated, and grandstand entertainment planned. Carnival companies, food vendors, and exhibitors all had to be scheduled and accommodated.

Despite these challenges, the Fairbury Fair continued to grow and adapt. Over time, new forms of entertainment were introduced. Automobile racing became a popular attraction during the twentieth century, drawing large crowds to the racetrack. Carnival rides and midway games also became important parts of the fair experience.

While the attractions have changed over the years, the basic challenge of organizing the fair has remained the same. Each year, fair managers must coordinate dozens of events, prepare the fairgrounds, and ensure that everything runs smoothly for thousands of visitors.

The continued success of the Fairbury Fair is a testament to the dedication of the many volunteers who have organized the event over the past 150 years. These men and women

have worked behind the scenes to overcome weather problems, financial difficulties, and many other obstacles.

Because of their efforts, the Fairbury Fair has endured as one of the community's most important traditions. The challenges faced by fair managers over the past century and a half only make the fair's long history even more remarkable.

At the 1887 Fairbury Fair, a hydrogen-filled balloon lifted off from the fairgrounds on a windy day. The balloon rose to 1,000 feet before strong winds carried it north, forcing it to land on Main Street in Fairbury.